

# Taking say away from students

Student leaders challenge admin changes, lack of communication

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Change is in the air, yet student voices cannot be heard. With so much of the university — from colleges to student organizations — being restructured, some student leaders are concerned they do not have a say in the future structure and operations of their own groups.

The Battalion currently faces such a situation in which its leadership was informed by Texas A&M university president M. Katherine Banks that The Battalion would no longer be printing its weekly paper editions. Though this decision was delayed until the end of the spring semester, other organizations have expressed concerns regarding the overreach of administration and their relevant decision making without consulting student leaders.

## Draggieland

Draggieland, a student-run drag competition, made its first appearance in 2020. While there was controversy, such as protests and petitions leading up to the first performance, it still took place in Rudder Auditorium on Feb. 19, 2020, tickets selling out in its inaugural year. While similar controversy took place before the 2021 performance, the show remained a success, expanding to two nights, boasting impressive ticket sales and keeping audiences safe to enjoy local performance art.

Despite this overwhelming success, Memorial Student Center, or MSC, Town Hall former head of Draggieland Bella Lopez was informed through her superiors in Town Hall on Nov. 19, 2021, that MSC Town Hall would no longer sponsor the event. Bradin Hanselka, Town Hall chair, said in a comment to The Battalion speaking on behalf of the organization, that students within MSC Town Hall were informed by their director.

“The students within MSC Town Hall were not consulted nor given any say regarding the decision made by the administration,” Hanselka said in the comment. “We were only notified by the MSC director of the decision.”

As more students got word of the decision, students involved in LGBTQ+ organizations across campus, such as TRANSCEND, Queer Aggies, Make-up Artist Aggies, LGBTQ+ Aggies and Out in STEM, or oSTEM, began looking for answers and an alternate means to host the event.

Chief of staff for oSTEM Daniel Hou, a chemistry and geology senior and head organizer of an alternative Draggieland event, said he first got word of this decision early in the fall semester through his contacts in MSC Town Hall.

“We got wind around November of 2021; we have a few friends in Town Hall and student government who told us that the administration, the higher ups of MSC Town Hall, decided they were no longer going to sponsor the event,” Hou said. “I think the term was a ‘university administrative entity.’ They did not give a reason why, but ... this is a really big deal, we can’t just sit on this.”

In response to the denial to support Draggieland through MSC Town Hall, LGBTQ+ student organizations formed their own alternate version of the program and plan to host

it on campus in April. Through social media, the new Draggieland program has received support from students, including raising over \$5,000 in less than a week through donations.

Despite MSC Town Hall losing its administrative support for Draggieland, in an official statement to The Battalion, university officials said they did not prevent “the group” from performing.

“Texas A&M did not disallow the group to perform. If a student organization wants to host an event, they are more than welcome to do so as long as they go through the proper protocols,” the comment states. “A student organization did so, and the event is set for April.”

“The group” the statement refers to is unclear, as the performers from Draggieland 2020 and 2021 were invited to audition by MSC Town Hall coordinators, and were not a part of the planning and university approval process.

Industrial engineering senior Zanab Toppa, president of oSTEM, said this lack of support from administration has shown how current students are not being prioritized.

“It’s just disappointing for me, honestly, because it seems the university decision is prioritizing former students over current students,” Toppa said. “While A&M has made many strides in the past few years, I think Draggieland has been the most visible on-campus event for LGBTQ+ students.”

Hou said Draggieland’s cancellation and a lack of support made them feel that LGBTQ+ Aggies are not cared for on campus.

“To me, it goes to show that A&M likes to show off the good parts, but likes to cover up the hatred and bigotry and ignorance, the homophobia that happens on campus,” Hou said. “It’s not even caring [about LGBTQ+ students], from my experience talking to administrators, they actively don’t really like us, as an LGBT community, dealing with the hatred that erupts around Draggieland.”

A point of frustration for Hou has been a lack of communication between administration and students about why the event is no longer being sponsored, he said. Many students reached out to the Vice President of Student Affairs, or VPSA, Gen. Joe Ramirez for explanation, Hou said, but have been unsuccessful in this contact.

“MSC Town Hall has a very structured organization with layers, and the top is the VPSA,” Hou said. “MSC Town Hall has been trying to reach out through the chain of command for months. They’ve been doing it properly, the entire time, getting absolutely no response. Every time they go up the chain of command, they get stonewalled, or they get told to [set up] a meeting.”

Despite multiple requests from The Battalion, Ramirez has declined to comment on the removal of sponsorship of Draggieland as of the time of publication.

Moving forward, Hou said his hope is that LGBTQ+ students will unify in the future in order to have their voices heard by administration.

“For the longest time, the queer student organizations have been trying to form a unified voice for LGBT student on campus, because we have six or seven LGBT organizations but we don’t have one unified voice for all of us,” Hou said. “So, Draggieland was the way that a lot of the four major ones united. We want

to use the leverage we have for Draggieland to push for establishment of a queer council at A&M.”

The lack of clarity, as well as the denial of the event, has spoken volumes about the priorities of administration, Hou said.

“I think the administration’s values are being clearly reflected in their policies,” Hou said. “We want Draggieland to happen next year and all the years after that. There is literally no reason to cancel Draggieland. It did well the first year, second year, it made profits; there is no reason that does not end in a ‘-phobia.’”

## Fish Camp

While it is unclear exactly when some student organizations began receiving new instructions and by whom, some changes were suggested toward a particular organization that were made public on Oct. 27, 2021.

Among organizations mentioned in the MGT consultation report was the long-standing freshman tradition: Fish Camp. The recommendation involved more faculty and university oversight into the selection and processes of operation of the organization, which was later accepted by President Banks. Current Fish Camp head director Mikayla Slaydon assumed her role on Sept. 20, 2021. Regarding selection processes, Slaydon confirmed that the organization now requires approval from the Office of the Vice President of Student Affairs.

“Our biggest change is definitely our selection timeline delay. Those started to appear right after I got selected for the position because, in a typical year, the head director starts picking assistant directors very soon after they are selected themselves,” Slaydon said. “So typically I would have assistant directors in the middle of October. I did not get those picked until the middle of November. And typically we would have chairs picked by the end of November, and I did not have chairs until last week.”

Other than the delay of chair decisions and the alteration of the process through VPSA, another change lies in the Fish Camp Values. The values were amended in 2018 to include “Diversity,” with A&M’s Core Values: Respect, Excellence, Leadership, Loyalty, Integrity and Selfless Service. However, diversity is no longer listed in the values, which Slaydon said happened before her term.

“For adjustment in our values and our mission statement, I would put those around the middle of October,” Slaydon said. “Those two changes were phrased as a ‘had already been decided before I had assumed the position.’ So I’m not quite sure of when those initial conversations were. That predated my assuming of the position.”

When asked why diversity was no longer in-

cluded in Fish Camp’s values, university officials responded with the following statement:

“The heart of Fish Camp is diversity — it’s bringing all Aggies together. The change was made to align Fish Camp’s core values with Texas A&M’s Core Values, which are Respect, Excellence, Leadership, Loyalty, Integrity and [Selfless] Service. This program — which is under Student Activities and is supported by a student organization — is a freshman’s first tradition. We want A&M’s Core Values to be a part of that introduction to the Aggie experience,” A&M’s statement to The Battalion reads. “The advisers for Fish Camp and this year’s director of Fish Camp both were told about the change in September.”

Former head director of Fish Camp Eric Muñoz, Class of 2021, said he was not a part of the decision to remove diversity from the camp’s values. So, this decision did not include input from two consecutive students in the highest student leadership position in Fish Camp, according to these two accounts.

“I was informed that the values were changing whenever recruitment [for director staff] was almost done,” Muñoz said. “Whatever head director recruitment was underway, it was then revealed to me that it was something that was on the table and it wasn’t an option.”

As he has no current affiliation with Fish Camp, Muñoz said he personally believes that students should be able to convey the ideas and values of their organization without restraint.

“It was presented that the reason for the change was to align the mission and vision and the values more with the university because it is the sole freshman orientation program,” Muñoz said. “That’s absolutely valid; however, I do stand with the ideology that you should always be able to also express your own personal belief system, if everybody within the organization agrees with them.”

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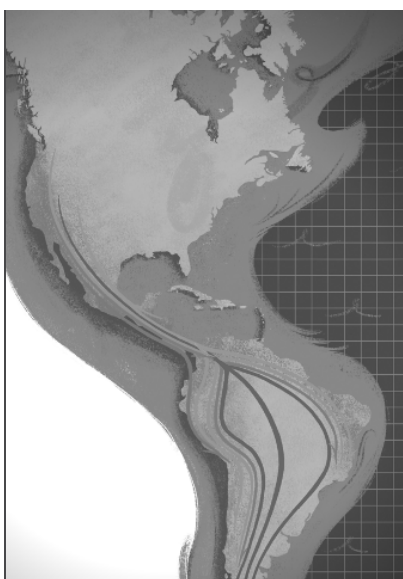
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**EDITORIAL CONTINUED**

And determine the future of our organization we will, as we advocate for the continuation of print editions in the journalism working group. We are willing to collaborate and discuss new options for The Battalion to work with a new Department of Journalism, but we will not change our editorial decisions based on what this department — or administration — may or may not want.

The tragic irony of the situation is at the same time Banks has claimed to advocate for journalism at A&M through the new department, she is actively killing the trust of potential students in the program.

“Good luck finding any prospective students who would want to write for a publication that is the university’s lapdog,” Ian Curtis said in A&M Consolidated High School’s publication, The Roar. “What do they gain from writing for a paper that’s nothing more than a public relations arm for the school?”

There has been one time in The Battalion’s 129 years when an A&M president tried to control editorial decisions, and there’s a plaza and a tower named after him. In 1965, Texas A&M University was facing a number of monumental changes, chief among them was allowing women and minorities. But it also faced serious administrative censorship.

President James Earl Rudder routinely told former editor-in-chief Thomas DeFrank, Class of 1967, “We do not air our dirty laundry in public.”

In DeFrank’s own words, “[Rudder] did not want his student newspaper to cause trouble.”

If The Battalion tried publishing anything political — or anything Rudder considered “detrimental” to A&M — DeFrank said members of the administration would completely remove the story when the paper arrived at A&M’s printing press, without notifying anyone at The Battalion.

In September of 1966, DeFrank said Rudder’s administration suddenly changed The Battalion’s masthead to read “Publisher: Texas A&M” above any student editors’ names — seizing the seat of true editorial control for the administration above student journalists. Administrators told DeFrank The Battalion was not allowed to publish anything in regard to the masthead changing. However, when a reporter from the Associated Press’ Dallas office called The Battalion to ask why the masthead had changed, DeFrank replied, “Well, none of us feel like we’re really a newspaper anymore.”

Thomas DeFrank was fired by the university as editor-in-chief of The Battalion on Sept. 30, 1966.

“[Rudder] felt like the student newspaper should be a chronicle of the good things happening around the university. He thought it should be ... a public relations adjunct,” DeFrank said.

The independent student voice of Texas A&M is not a public relations adjunct of anyone. We print the news; the good, the bad and the ugly. Anyone who has any concerns over that can take it up with the First Amendment of the United States’ Constitution.

**STUDENT ORGS CONTINUED**

Muñoz was made aware of the decision through conversation with one of the Fish Camp advisers, not through an office of university administration, and was similarly not given a reason as to why.

“I think that [diversity] was added for a reason,” Muñoz said. “I think that it wasn’t something just to fill a void. I think, obviously, we saw a need for it as an organization and that’s why it was added.”

The entire experience of last semester was a learning curve for both administrators and Fish Camp leadership, Slaydon said. She added the increased involvement with the VPSA’s office in recruitment along with the typically student-made decisions still require some adjustment, especially considering the recent organizational changes.

“I think that since changes started happening last fall, we, the Fish Camp organization and the VPSA office, have undergone a learning curve and what it means to be collaborative with another audience,” Slaydon said. “From our side, we’re not used to having people other than only student leaders and with our adviser, approve membership or conduct our selection processes when we originally had them set. The VPSA office typically takes a more detached role from student organizations and doesn’t really collaborate with students directly. Both of those changed this year.”

When the faculty advisers of Fish Camp, Carly Rice and Andrew Caruth, were asked for comment, The Battalion was directed to A&M’s Department of Marketing and Communications, which provided the aforementioned comment from university officials.

**SBP Reactions**

Student Body President Natalie Parks said the recent news of The Battalion made her wonder about the future of other student organizations, as some have faced situations in which they did not know what they could challenge or why changes were being made to their organizations in the first place.

“Student leaders have been blindsided in those situations, or sat down and given a list of demands that they felt like they didn’t have the possibility or opportunity to say no to, given the

environment and intimidation factor,” Parks said. “A lot of them are probably more willing to speak up now versus back in the fall. A lot of us didn’t want to or just felt uncomfortable doing so.”

Parks said, starting in November of 2021, members of the Student Government Association had heard some conversation about Draggieland’s discontinuation, and some formal discussions were had regarding gathering information about the circumstances of this decision. Through this, similarities between this situation and other organizations became apparent.

“We did get the full story of what was happening, but there wasn’t anything written down,” Parks said. “That is something that we have seen with these different scenarios, whether it’s Fish Camp or The Battalion or MSC Town Hall, is that these student were sat down and told all these different things that they either had to change going forward about their processes or the fact that an event wouldn’t be able to happen and they wouldn’t even be able to go through the approval process in the first place without any sort of written memorandum or email; no sort of written correspondence.”

Parks said one of the common themes she has heard through conversations with student leaders is the lack of communication and collaboration between who in administration is making decisions about organizations and the organizations’ members.

“It seems that discussions are being had with and between administrators and university officials,” Parks said. “It’s never mentioned who those people are. We can make our guesses, but nothing is ever clarified, necessarily, when these students are sat down, usually not with the individuals who have made the executive decision. I guess that [is] a pattern of delegation.”

One factor which also seems to be ignored, Parks said, is the vast experience some student leaders have, after being in their respective organizations for most of their college lives and knowing more than anyone outside the organization about their operations.

“With these various things that have happened, and the fact that students, the student leaders who put on these traditions, put on the programs, write the paper, are the experts in that field, and these decisions are being made without any consultation of their perspectives and experience in those spaces,” Parks

said. “That, to me, is largely unacceptable, and quite honestly doesn’t make any sense, because we are — like I said — the experts at what we do.”

Specifically regarding changes to Fish Camp, Parks said the lack of input from students and the sudden actions out of students’ control bring up many questions about its implications now and for the future of other organizations.

“Being sat down in a meeting and basically told, ‘You are going to alter your entire selection timeline for choosing directors,’ that’s what happened with Fish Camp,” Parks said. “‘You are going to change your values of your organization that are extremely important to every single aspect of the culture and the way that you function to reflect the university Core Values,’ when other organizations on campus don’t have to do that, raises a lot of red flags.”

Currently, Parks said no such changes have been made to SGA by administration — or any other entities outside that may influence such decisions — but some have expressed concerns about the future of student government.

“People do fear that that could be next for SGA, specifically certain committees in student government that put on huge traditions such as Aggie Muster or Traditions Council [who] puts on Silver Taps,” Parks said. “Those are things that have a lot of value to the university and to former students, and it seems that certain groups of former students want to have a seat at the table and essentially want a say in how these traditions are run on campus, even though they don’t go here anymore. That’s something that we’ve also noticed.”

Parks said she believes many of the current problems with administrative overreach could be solved simply by involving students in spaces where decisions regarding their organizations are being made. She also expressed concern from her perspective as a leader of a student organization that administrative changes may not align with the future goals and wishes of herself or members of SGA.

“The fact that administration isn’t including key stakeholders, the students, the experts of these organizations, in these different spaces where the decision is being made ... it doesn’t make any sense,” Parks said. “I really don’t understand how you can think you’re an expert in an area that you’ve never been involved in.”

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